Introduction

rev. 24/10/2026

This collection of essays complements my three books on the pragmatics of literature (*Reading and Listening; Poetry and Community*, and *Constructing Shakespeares*).[1] Together, these works reflect my long-standing interest in a dimension of literary study that has often received less attention than it deserves, less than semantic or syntactic approaches: the pragmatic relationship between texts, audiences, and the communities in which literary meaning is produced.

My work has consistently approached literature from this perspective. Influenced by speech act theory, cultural anthropology, performance studies, and the study of orality and literacy, I have been less interested in literary texts as isolated objects than in the events, practices, and institutions through which they are experienced and valued. Rather than treating canonical works as self-evidently significant, I have sought to understand how their significance is produced, maintained, and transformed over time.

Professors of literature often have the role of priests. They introduce the community of students to canonical works (or works they would like to be canonical). They repeatedly deal with certain works—such as Shakespeare's plays or Goethe's poems—and interpret them (always assuming their high value). It is repetition of this (but not only this) kind that makes sure the works remain in the canon, and they also confirm the authority of those who officiate at these occasions.

Canon traditionally refers to the "collection or list of books of the Bible accepted by the Christian Church as genuine and inspired. Also transferred, any set of sacred books; also, those writings of a secular author accepted as authentic."[2]

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[1] See Appendix for details.

[2] OED canon 4.

Surprisingly, the first use of *canon* for a literary text is documented only in 1953.[3]

Literary scholars tend to treat canonical texts as stable objects, editing them critically, trying to decide their origin and their authenticity. They read and interpret them in ways that go well beyond those of an educated reader and find truths in them that are closed to others.

Literary studies continue to be mostly interested in semantics, which is not surprising considering its social function as a successor to theology. They seem to content themselves with a certain notion of *text,* often enriched by verbal and social context, which is based on a watered-down formalist definition or variations of the source-message-addressee model, the so-called conduit model of communication.

Unlike the common sender-message-addressee model, where an object is handed over, speech act theory sees the recipients as experiencing an extension and change of their cognitive environment, an event rather than an object.[4]

Because of this I have been of the conviction that before taking for granted certain texts as canonical—and therefore worth special attention as objects of study—we should find out how they achieved this status. In other words: we should study canonical text not like priests but like religious studies scholars.

I have published essays on the topic in two areas: Shakespeare and poetry. As I find the issues of continuing and even greater relevance in poetry, I am now also collecting those essays on poetry, complementing them with unpublished material. I have tried to avoid repetitions; I let some of them stand because they document how I have tried to promote my cause in various places and media.

The essays collected here mostly date back decades and were often published in obscure places. I have revised them

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[3] OED 3.a. The canon and the text. *C. J. Sisson, Shakespeare: Complete Works p. xviii (heading).*

[4] In a historical context, it may be of interest that Raymond Williams, in *Keywords*, describes the change in meaning of the word *literature* in the eighteenth century from "the skill in dealing with written texts"[4] to "a body of imaginative texts" Williams 183–88.

sparingly where this seemed necessary and removed passages that would have been too repetitive. Only the last one comes from one of my books; I hope it will put the essays into the context they belong.

I have, however, checked how the issues discussed in them are looked at today, in 2025, and I have come to the conclusion, both troubling and gratifying, that things have not changed that much: troubling, because not much seems to have changed in the area I am interested in, and gratifying because it means that my argument still stands[5]

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This has also been a personal journey. What in retrospect may look like orderly progress was in fact a complex process, often determined by non-academic experiences.

At the beginning there was a question of language and identity, a very Swiss problem. Unlike in other countries, dialects do not mark social hierarchy and are widely used in conversation. I grew up in one city, Basel, with parents who had moved there from the Zurich area. The dialects of the two regions are markedly different, and I can still speak either of them, depending on the person I am talking with, but I never learned the characteristic Basel guttural /r/. This miniscule fault had grave consequences: People kept asking me, "But you are not from here, are you?" Feeling both inside and outside put me in a distinct position.

As a German-speaking Swiss I have also been exposed to two quite different variants of language, Standard German in writing and dialect in daily conversation. This made me aware that orality and literacy are not characteristic of two mutually exclusive types of culture but exist beside each other. Not surprisingly, my first book was an experiment, the life-story told by a local fisherman written in his own dialect (Städeli).

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[5] Literary studies and linguistics have for long parted their ways and attempts to bring them together again, have led, as so often when fields of study try to re-combine, to a lively new specialism, often called *stylistics*, rather than a reform. The Poetics and Linguistics Association (PALA) was founded in 1983 and publishes its own journal *Language and Literature.* Where pragmatics is concerned, there is the pioneering collection *Literary Pragmatics,* edited by Roger D. Sell, published in 1991 and again in 2015.

Another formative experience was acting and directing in an amateur theatre company. There I learnt how entering the stage, crossing that magic threshold, can transform one's personality, also how the botched ending of a performance, when the curtain did not come down, could make the transition from stage to everyday reality painful.

My most formative theatrical experience was as a member of the audience. I attended the same production of *The Merchant of Venice* at the London Old Vic on successive nights, New Year's Eve, and the day before that. The performances were quite different from each other. On New Year's Eve it was much funnier: An audience getting ready for partying was in a jolly mood, ready to laugh, and the actors reacted to this, by playing accordingly. It taught me to take seriously the shaping role of the audience in a theatrical event. This eventually led to an article that I still cherish (Engler, "Else My Project Fails: Applause and the Authority of Shakespeare's Texts")

As a young man I had literary aspirations, wrote plays, and published poetry. On one of the rare occasions when I was invited to read a poem—they were always short—to a fairly large audience, the MC asked me to read it a second time. I was stunned how the poem became something quite different from what it had been before.[6]

These experiences strengthened my interest in how poems are embedded in a non-verbal context. I dealt with the issue in *Reading and Listening: The modes of communicating poetry and their influence on the texts.* As the full title indicates I approached the issues in a conventional manner, collecting all the evidence from the texts themselves.

I was then offered the opportunity to edit the *Othello* volume of a critical English-German Shakespeare edition, which involved a close study of the various extant texts and their origins. This drew my attention to the history of performance and publication, and led me to question Shakespeare, the genius, as the sole authority of the texts we have.

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[6] This experience was the basis of "'There She Stands as if Alive': A Reading of Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess'". in Engler (*Reading and listening* 67–74).

During a year-long research stay at the University of Michigan, for which I had proposed a project on Vachel Lindsay (a famous poet famous in the first two decades of the twentieth century, but since forgotten), I gained new perspectives well beyond this individual poet. Lindsay's son Nick, himself a poet, introduced me to *ethnopoetics*, and thus to anthropological approaches. and the poetry of people like Jerome Rothenberg and Gary Snyder.[7]

The result was my book *Poetry and Community*, half of which is devoted to poetics in general, drawing on cultural anthropology (Victor Turner, Richard Schechner, Mary Douglas), relevance theory (Dan Sperber, Deirdre Wilson), philosophy of science (Jean-François Lyotard, Thomas S. Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend), orality and history studies (Walter J. Ong, Terence Hawkes) and other sources. The second half is about Vachel Lindsay's practice as a performance poet who was well ahead of his times.

[7] I gave my inaugural lecture as a professor on the topic: "Die Rückkehr der Sänger: Neuere Entwicklungen in der amerikanischen Literaturwissenschaft," University of Basel, 20 April 1982. An English version, "The Return of the Bards," is included here, in chapter 6.

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